

A Review of White Malice: The CIA and the Covert Recolonization of Africa by Susan Williams

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Africa has long been looked at by outsiders as a continent that is hopelessly mired in corruption and incapable of social and economic development. This especially pertains to sub-Saharan Africa, overwhelmingly populated by black people, thus fitting the trope of white supremacists that black people cannot successfully govern themselves.

This book by Susan Williams annihilates the lie. Williams details the impact of stealing millions of people for enslavement, the subsequent colonization of the continent by Western European powers and then, after the decolonization of a number of these countries, the recolonization of the continent by the United States operating explicitly albeit covertly through its Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). She expressly shows in mind-blowing detail the process by which this recolonization was affected, including the 1960 authorization of the assassination of Patrice Lumumba, Prime Minister of the Congo, by US President Dwight David Eisenhower.

Williams begins her account with the slave trade: "recent authoritative research for a major database estimate that more than twelve and a half million captive individuals were forced to leave Africa between 1501 and 1875," and those "Nearly two million of those people are estimated to have perished during the horror of the journeys; many died through disease or ill treatment, and others, in despair or defiance, jumped overboard" (19-20). She orients her account from the perspective of Ghana, pointing out that

To facilitate the transatlantic slave trade, more than fifty castles and forts were built along the 260 miles of the Gold Coast by the various slave trading nations. Through the bleak fortifications passed people captured within what is now Ghana and in surrounding territories (21).

She continues with her account of the 1884-1885 Berlin Conference, whereby the countries of Western Europe divided Africa up among themselves “in order to acquire natural resources to feed their growing industries, and also to build global markets for these industries” (26). One of the key prizes was awarding the Congo to King Leopold of Belgium, “a territory that was bigger than all of Western Europe and nearly eighty times the size of Belgium” (27).

Image: Kwame Nkrumah and Patrice Lumumba



It is from this perspective—Ghana and the Congo—and through key leaders like Kwame Nkrumah of the former and Patrice Lumumba of the latter, that Williams tells her story which really extends across southern Africa as a whole, and at times, the entire continent. It is developed from World War II—the uranium for the atomic bombs used by the United States on Hiroshima and Nagasaki came from a Belgian-owned mine near Shinkolobwe in the Congo— until the early 1960s, focusing on the efforts by many African countries to gain and keep their independence, rejecting and repudiating colonization from European countries.

Colonization had been horrific. The Western European countries sought to obtain raw materials and natural resources at the absolute cheapest prices possible, and without any regard for the impact on the peoples of the colonies they plundered. They used extreme brutality to get them. In the Congo alone, under the 23 year direct rule of King Leopold II, before he gave it to Belgium, “an estimated ten million people died as a consequence of brutality and execution; this amounted to about 50 percent of the population” (27-28).

The brutality of colonization was rationalized as trying to “civilize” the heathens, to train them to fit into the modern world. At independence day in the Congo—June 30, 1960—the King of Belgium, Baudouin, claimed that over the previous 80 years, Belgium had sent “The best of its sons. These “pioneers,” he added, “had built communications, founded a medical service, modernized agriculture and built cities and industries and schools—raising the well-being of your population and equipping the country with technicians indispensable to its development” (177).

The practices of the colonizers undercut this lie: as a *New York Times* reporter who was present later stated, “barely half of the Congolese can read and write, and only sixteen Congolese are university or college graduates. There are no Congolese doctors, lawyers or engineers, and no African officers in the 25,000-man Congolese Army” (177).

And from that, the Congolese were expected to develop a modern society ... and immediately.

Yet, at the same time, the political context in which “independence” was achieved must be remembered: it was during the Cold War between the US and the Soviet Union. And that meant that “outsiders” were taking great interest in what was developing in southern Africa. When we realize the incredible mineral deposits in the country in general, as well as the greatest deposits of enriched uranium in the world at Shinkolobwe, and we see private business interests and US government political interests combined, then we see riding in is the CIA: the Congolese were not allowed to develop their country in peace. The Congo became recognized as the lynch pin of anti-colonial liberation across the continent.

Williams detailed the importance of the clear-sighted Kwame Nkrumah, who became the first president of Ghana upon its independence in 1957. Nkrumah and his political forces wanted to advance the liberation of the entire continent, and were envisioning a “United States of Africa,” seeing continental political unity the only way possible to achieve such. Incredibly important to this political project was the All African People’s Conference in Accra, Ghana in December 1958. This was “the first time in history that Africans from across the continent would assemble together” and on African soil (36).

More than three hundred political and trade union leaders responded. They represented some sixty-five organizations from twenty-eight African territories, including colonies ruled by Britain, France, Belgium, Portugal, and Spain. Fraternal delegates and observers also came, including visitors from Canada, the People’s Republic of China, India, Indonesia, the Soviet Union, Czechoslovakia, the USA, Britain, and other European countries (37).

Perhaps most fateful for Nkrumah and Africa was the attendance of Patrice Lumumba of the Congo.

Nkrumah and the 33-year old Lumumba met and hit it off. Lumumba was the leader of an independence-seeking political movement in his country. Nkrumah recognized the importance of the Congo:

“Geographically, strategically, and politically ... the Congo is the most vital region of Africa. Military control of the Congo by any foreign power would give it easy access to most of the continent south of the Sahara,” he wrote in his 1967 book, *Challenge of the Congo*. He recognized its central position, including “its vast area and tremendous resources.”

“Foreign powers,” noted Nkrumah, “clearly regard the Congo as the key to military control of Africa.” This was the significance ... “of the aid which Belgium received from her allies, to build great military bases at Kitona in the West and Kamina in the East of the Congo. This is the reason why there are eight international airports, thirty principal and over a hundred secondary and local airports in the Congo.”

The Congo, he argued, was the buffer state between independent Africa in the North and

the lands beset by colonialism and white supremacy in the South. “Northwards stands free Africa determined on a free continent. Southwards, Angola begins and stretches to the stronghold of colonial and racial oppression, the Republic of South Africa.”

“The degree of the Congo’s independence ... will substantially determine the ultimate fate of the whole Continent of Africa” (34-35).

It was from this understanding that Nkrumah recognized the importance of Lumumba.

Unfortunately, however, people in the United States government, and especially the CIA, also understood the importance of Africa to the Cold War and of the Congo’s importance to Africa. They refused to see Africa’s desire to remain independent of both the United States and the Soviet Union, and assumed that any effort that did not embrace the United States meant being pro-Communist, thus serving as an enemy of the United States.

Key to American government efforts was positioning the United States as an ally to liberation struggles and being against European colonialism. The US was against European colonialism, but it was also against African liberation, seeking to control Africa for its own economic and political interests.

Williams carefully and extensively documents the CIA efforts to gain control over Africa and especially the Congo. Perhaps most critically—building off reporting by *Ramparts* magazine, the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, and later books by Frances Stonor Saunders and Hugh Wilford—she reports efforts by the CIA to influence the thinking and cultural impact of intellectuals: “Eventually, more than 225 different organizations—operating in many parts of the world including Africa—were identified as direct or indirect recipients of CIA funds” (56). These included organizations that suggested they were supportive of African liberation, both in the US and in Europe, but were specifically advancing the interests of particular US businesses, the US government, or both.

This—it must be kept in mind—was in conjunction with US military operations in the South Atlantic, private businessmen seeking to advance their financial and economic interests ahead of everything else, as well as efforts by the CIA operating directly to bribe Congolese officials at all levels so as to buy their political support. This was done under both the Eisenhower and Kennedy administrations in the 1950s and ‘60s. [Although Williams did not put it in these terms, the US Empire must be advanced under both Republicans and Democrats, while perhaps differing on domestic policies.]. And, of course, it continued beyond.

In other words, this was a massive effort to recolonize the Congo under American control, replacing European colonialism with US neo-colonialism.

Image: Joseph-Désiré Mobutu (Licensed under the Public Domain)



A key figure in all of these machinations was Joseph-Désiré Mobutu. Mobutu helped remove Lumumba from his office as Prime Minister, leading to incredible civil unrest, and then was active in Lumumba's killing in early 1961. (Mobutu and allies killed Lumumba before the CIA could; in efforts supported by Eisenhower, the CIA had brought a trained assassin into the country, as well as the CIA's leading bio-technician with poison for Lumumba.). The resulting civil unrest was extensive: "It has been estimated that the conflict in the Congo between 1961 and 1965 led to the deaths of one million people." Mobutu was a collaborator with the US. And "In December 1965, Joseph-Désiré Mobutu once again overthrew civilian rule in a coup backed by the CIA" (518). Williams concludes her account, "For the next thirty-one years, the Congo was ruled with an iron fist by Mobutu—a dictator chosen by the US government and installed by the CIA" (518).

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This is a sweeping book. Williams is a careful scholar who extensively details her sources and the evidentiary bases of her findings, and is unwilling to make claims she cannot support. Her choice of Nkrumah and Lumumba for perspective was excellent, and she conveys well the importance of their efforts. Her approach is systematic and rigorous. She interweaves successfully various levels of politics and analysis. Her sources provide an understanding of what really happened, but she also has the knowledge and experience to reject claims that cannot be substantiated or are "disingenuous," especially when using autobiographies of former CIA agents.

This book provides an extremely rigorous and detailed history of CIA activities in the Congo during 1960-61, which is absolutely crucial to understanding subsequent developments on the continent, especially in the southern part. Because of the activities in the Congo by Angolan organizations, especially concerning the organization and activities of CIA-supported Holden Roberto, she provides additional information on the struggles in Angola prior to its gaining its independence in 1975. It seems likely that the details in the Congo will also "slush over" into Zambia and particularly Zimbabwe, although probably not into Mozambique and South Africa, nor Namibia. What one gains from such a detailed account is how difficult the US has made "independence" in southern Africa, and how much

revolutionaries have had to do to prevail. And then, how difficult it has been subsequently to transform neo-colonial societies into liberatory ones.

The fact is that limitations of post-independence governments have not been primarily because of Black people's incompetence, but mainly because of machinations by the CIA and related agencies, and organizations dominated by the United States, such as the World Bank and International Monetary Fund. Williams does not make the argument—although by providing such conclusive evidence, she moves us closer to our understanding of the US's foreign policy and operations—but critical observers must shift our understanding from considering the US as an individual country, albeit first among others, to understanding that the US is the heartland of the US Empire that has consciously been trying to dominate the world since about 1943, but definitely since 1945, and has had the economic, political, cultural, military, and diplomatic power and will to do so.

It is this evidence from southern Africa that perhaps illuminates the US Empire most clearly to date, although we need to know more about AFL-CIO operations in the region—we know they were present—as well as activities of the US-dominated financial institutions. We also need similarly detailed accounts of US-South African relations during the period; the US government interacted differently with white-dominated South Africa than it did with Black-led countries.

Why the southern African case is so important is that the US extended massive effort to undercut Black independence and then democracy when events in southern Africa at that time were of *all-but-no consequence to the safety and security of the United States*. Emotionally, and perhaps for some even politically, southern Africa was of importance to some African Americans, but it was for a relative few among them, and much, much less for all but a few white Americans. Southern Africa was not linked to a country that could theoretically be seen as a potential enemy, as one could argue—albeit incorrectly—about Vietnam and China. This case unambiguously illustrates that US government activities around the world *are for something much larger, much more impactful, than the mere defense of a single country, the United States of America*. That larger entity, as I've been arguing since 1984, is the US Empire.

This might grate on most Americans' ears. Yet Alfred W. McCoy, in his brilliant *'In the Shadows of the American Century': The Rise and Decline of US Global Power* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2017)—reviewed in *Class, Race and Corporate Power* ([Volume 6, Issue 1](#)) by this reviewer—put it clearly: “Calling a nation that controls half of the planet's military forces and much of its wealth an ‘empire’ became nothing more fitting an analytical frame to appropriate facts” (McCoy: 44).

Accordingly, this case has a relevance beyond the early 1960s and beyond southern Africa. Establishing the existence of the US Empire enables us to see why so much time, resources, military troops, and determination was put into subjugation of Vietnam, and then later, Iraq and Afghanistan, *not one of which was a threat to the United States*. It also explains the motivation behind efforts by the CIA and the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) to undercut and destroy progressive efforts around the world. And—by arguing the need to include the efforts of the AFL-CIO in southern Africa—we can understand that the leadership of the AFL-CIO thinks the US *should* dominate the world, and has been working for the past 100+ years to help realize that goal.

Where this comes together contemporaneously is in understanding US efforts in the

Ukraine; the Empire has found a way to undercut a major rival, Russia—which it has never been able to subjugate—while supporting the “heroic” government of Zelensky, without getting its dirty hands soiled further. And yet, we know enough to know that the US government precipitated the Russian invasion of Ukraine. While this is not to applaud or even to accept the invasion of Ukraine by Russia or to ignore the suffering of the people of Ukraine, it is to recognize that much is going on below the surface today that will eventually be detailed.

And for those who are looking, events in the Ukraine are showing that most of the US mass media—and I specifically include the *New York Times*—are not just reporting but are actually supporting the efforts of the US Empire in Ukraine, despite their pious duck tears for the embattled Ukrainian peoples.

This, I’m willing to bet, will all come out in the future. In *White Malice*, Susan Williams has shown us how to do it. We need to study her work, and then apply its lessons to the future. Those who fail to learn the lessons of the past are doomed to repeat them; as Country Joe and the Fish once sang, “Be the first one on your block to have your boy come home in a box”

To Williams, I give the highest compliment I can give: I wish I had written this book!

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